

Original Paper

On the Application of Code-switching Strategy in Business English Teaching Under the Construction of “New Liberal Arts”

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Abstract

In English teaching classrooms, code switching is becoming a common phenomenon and as a teaching strategy it has been widely used by teachers in China. Under the background of construction of “New Liberal Arts”, this paper sets out to investigate teachers’ code-switching strategy in ESP (English for Special Purposes) teaching, especially in business English teaching classrooms. It is found that conscious and necessary code-switching in ESP teaching classrooms can make teaching more efficient, and its functions and positive effects on bilingual teaching should not be underestimated. It is hoped that this study can provide some suggestion to ESP teaching and help enhance an effective teaching mode by using code-switching strategy and suggest that teachers should be aware of this teaching tactic and use it technically in their teaching process.

Keywords

code switching, ESP teaching, business English, classroom teaching

1. Introduction

In recent years, code-switching has drawn attention from many scholars and researchers and lots of studies on it have been made. Generally, code-switching is taken as the constant rapid alternation between two languages or more languages in the same unit of discourse. Scholars hold that the occurrence of code switching is not because of the defect of language capability but present the degree of proficiency of two different languages. It is considered as an effective tool or mean in education (Poplack, 1980). Since the 80s of 20 century, researches on code-switching in bilingual classroom processes has been undertaken in many countries. Researchers of second language acquisition (Cook, 2001; Ellis, 1999) has absorbed the achievements of code-switching in language learning. In this way, “code-switching” is considered as the using of two or more languages in language learning classroom. In a bilingual background, generally code-switching usually happens with two elements: one is that there is the need or behavior for communication; the other is that the speakers are capable of two or more languages. In a foreign language teaching classroom, this phenomenon can sometimes happen. Researchers have investigated both classroom talk and the role of code-switching.

Under the background of construction of “New Liberal Arts” in China proposed by the Chinese Ministry of Education in the *New liberal arts Declaration*, the integration of different disciplines are strongly advocated and there is an urgent call for the reform and innovation in the liberal arts, especially for discipline integration. However, few attempts on code-switching in bilingual education have focused on the integrated discipline of ESP teaching, combining English teaching with a specific field such as business, law, engineer, medicine, etc. Taking business English teaching as an example, this study will focus on the integrated discipline of both language and business as the needs for international business or foreign trade talents are increasingly high in recent years. Business English major students usually not only have higher level of English language proficiency and grasp more English knowledge including the western culture than non-English majors, but also they are aiming at learning more specific knowledge of business in English. This study will investigate code-switching in ESP teaching, especially in business English teaching classrooms and try to find out its necessity, functions and significance in ESP education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Code-Switching

Anyone who speaks more than one language chooses between them according to circumstances (Hudson, 1980). Although there have been many attempts to define “code-switching”, and although opinions may vary, it is generally accepted that it means the constant rapid alternation between two languages in the same unit of discourse. A more commonly-quoted definition of code-switching is from Myers-Scotton (1988, p. 151), who holds that code-switching is “the use of two or more linguistic varieties in the same conversation or interaction. The switch may be for just one word or for several minutes of speech. The varieties may be anything from genetically unrelated languages to two styles of

the same language”. Hoffman (1991, p. 110) holds that code-switching is “the alternate use of two languages or linguistic varieties within the same utterance or during the same conversation.” On the other hand, people regard a speech adorned with words and phrases of another language also differently. Some believe that it is only borrowing, in which the speaker uses words from another language to express ideas or concepts that they cannot find the right words in their native language. This is especially true of the situation in which one language dominates, and the speaker is talking about some technical subjects or foreign topics.

Poplack (1980, pp. 581-618) has divided code-switching into three types: inter-sentential, intra-sentential and tag switching. Inter-sentential code-switching “contains a switch at a clause or sentence boundary, where each clause or sentence is in one language or another”; intra-sentential code-switching is involved in a switch within the clause or sentence boundary; and tag switching concerns “the insertion of tag in one language into an utterance entirely in another language” (Poplack 1980). The social linguistics divided this language switching phenomenon into code-switching and code-mixing (Wardhaugh, 1982). Some scholars hold that the former refers to intrasentential switch and the latter intersentential. Scholars deem that there are some syntactical rules in code switching while code-mixing is an informal process. Other researchers believe that there is no clear demarcation line between them so they use code-switching to mean both of them. According to Gumperz (1982), code-switching can be divided into two types, namely, situational code-switching, and metaphorical code-switching. Situational code-switching refers to code-switching as a result of a change in topic, change of participants, etc. Social communities have certain fixed views towards the topic, situation, participants as well as attitudes towards certain language variety. Situational code-switching is dependent on this systematic view. In metaphorical code-switching, a linguistic variety normally applied in a certain situation is applied in another situation. The purpose is to create a certain atmosphere to draw attention to or emphasize certain points.

This paper adopts the view that code-switching and code-mixing are different concepts. Code-switching is the inevitable consequence of bilingualism. Code-switching has no limit to quantity. It can be as brief as a word or a conversation lasting a few minutes. The code used can be another language not related historically, or two varieties of the same language.

2.2 Code-switching and Bilingualism Research

The study of code-switching can be a multidisciplinary endeavor, and a lot of studies have been done from sociological, psychological, and linguistic angles home and abroad. The sociolinguistic study of code-switching focuses on the internal relationship between code conversion and social factors and its social significance and social motivation (Gumperz, 1982); Psycholinguistic research focuses more on the psychological factors affecting the occurrence of code switching and its perception in bilingual communication and proposes the mechanism of psychological switching (Macnamara, 1967); and the linguistic study will focus on on the actual process of switching, namely, the phonetic, grammatical and semantic, pragmatic or functional changes related to code-switching from the perspectives of structural

linguistics, pragmatics, system functional linguistics as well as corpus research (Giles, 1991; He & Yu, 2001; Kecskes, 2006; Liu, 2000; Lu et al., 2003; Myers-Scotton, 1993a; Yu, 2021). They mainly deal with language choice, attitude and reason for code-switching, relation between language frequency and code-switching, and bilingualism in general.

“Perhaps the central issue in bilingualism research is code-switching, the alternative use by bilinguals of two or more languages in the same conversation” (Milroy & Muysken, 1995). Many previous studies (Macaro, 2001; Swain, & Lapkin, 2000, etc.) on code-switching in classrooms are conducted. They have carried out extensive observations of classroom interaction and conducted close analysis of classroom language. Research on code-switching in bilingual classrooms has been cross-disciplinary in nature and has thus reflected different currents of influence: from educational research on classroom interaction and teacher talk styles and, more recently, from conversational analysis, pragmatics and the ethnography of communication.

The purpose of this paper is to study the code-switching strategy applied in the business English teaching classrooms from the stand of ESP teachers, and further explore the necessity and functions of using this strategy in ESP teaching under the construction of “New Liberal Arts” in China.

3. The Application of Code-switching Strategy in Business English Teaching

3.1 The Necessity of Using Code-switching Strategy in Business English teaching

As a teaching tactic, code-switching is necessary in the process of teaching. And it is badly needed in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) teaching classroom because ESP students learn the language of English as well as something specific which contains professional knowledge. For instance, business English or legal English students should not only grasp English, but also try hard to learn the knowledge of business or law.

“From perspective of native language, many teachers who are in favor of the application of communication techniques in the language teaching environment oppose any form of native language use during classroom instruction.” (Richard, 1997) However, supporters of the use of native language in the form of code-switching suggest that it may be an effective strategy in various aspects. Code-switching allows bilinguals to speak in both of their language. It is a form of communication that is agreed on by both of the members of the conversation. It serves facilitating the communication between teachers and students instead of presenting interference to make classroom instruction achieve maxim communication.

On the opposite side, some people consider that the native language would definitely damage the development of targeted language and it is not good for students’ language learning because the environment of English is broken if code-switching is adopted. They claim that in the short several hours of teaching activities, students should be completely exposed to the target language environment. Otherwise, students will decline dramatically in listening and oral capability as well as their business English assimilation. But in fact, sometime it would obtain a better effect using less the second

language, especially when students are introduced to difficult systematic theoretical knowledge or professional knowledge such as business, economy or law, etc. And code switching should be applied on the condition of proper use and being used with consciousness.

Chinese culture is another reason for the necessity of using code-switching in ESP teaching. In Chinese culture, the concept of hierarchy has been stressed and deeply rooted in people's mind. Teachers and students have different social status, which both of them are aware of and because of which, students dare not communicate with their teacher in the way they do to their classmates. Teachers' code switching to Chinese could draw him/her closer to his/her students. With respect to points mentioned above, it may be suggested that code-switching is not a blockage or deficiency in study but a useful tool to promote students learning interest with the aim of making meaning clear and transferring knowledge to students in an effective and efficient way.

3.2 The Application and Functions of Code-switching Strategy in Business English Teaching

As a teaching tactic, code-switching strategy is widely adopted by teachers in classrooms, especially by teachers who teach ESP (English for Specific Purposes). The predominant teaching language in classroom is considered as the "subject language (matrix language)" and the other language that is switched to is called "embedded language" (Myers-Scotton, 1993a/1993b). Appropriate and timely use of code-switching is necessary as code-switching strategy can only improve the teaching efficiency, but also help students have a deep understanding of related professional terms.

For business English students, they are at the stage of learning while they lack the professional knowledge in business field in English. Teachers should sometimes explain it in the mother tongue for students' better understanding, so the phenomenon of code-switching takes place. There are some major functions for teachers' code-switching strategy applied in business English teaching classrooms such as for standard translation of the professional words and expressions, for better communication with the students, for emphasizing or clarifying professional knowledge, for socializing functions and so on. So in the following we will analyze how code-switching strategy is applied in the ESP teaching classrooms and the functions they have played in the teaching process.

3.2.1 For Good Understanding of Business Terms or Expressions

For ESP (English for Specific Purposes) students, they should not only learn the language of English, but also are going to learn something special which contains professional knowledge. For business English students, there are a lot of business terms and expressions which they are unfamiliar with and are seldom used in daily communication. So proper translation of these new terms and expressions is one of the tasks that students should learn from the class and teachers will inevitably need to code-switch to the translation versions of these new expressions in classroom to ensure that students have good understanding of and have grasped these terms and expressions in both the mother tongue and target language.

Moreover, though the business English major students have good command of English than other students, since they step into the field of business English, they have to learn a large amount of

knowledge which is fresh and complicated to them. Teachers' use of code switching can explain the professional knowledge much clearly which can make the students grasp the main points quickly instead of being confused.

For example, in the class of *International Trade*, the teacher says: "...in this part, the word "negotiate" is a polysemy, which has two meanings in L/C special clause, the former refers to "议付" whereas the latter means "转让". "Negotiation" and "negotiable" are the derivation of "negotiate'.....". Here code-switching took place by using embedded language of Chinese phrases "议付" "转让" into the matrix language of English. Because the teacher wants to make the students understand these business terms which can be the obstacle in students' understanding of what they have heard and it is necessary for the teacher to switch to Chinese so that students can fully understand what they mean with the teacher's instruction.

And there is another example in business English class. The teacher says "Generally, in provisions of law, we often use some doublets or triplets. For instance, when we mention "损失", we use "losses and damages" and if we want to express "无效" in the contract, we use "null and void" together and so on. " Here the teacher adopts the code-switching strategy by using embedded language of Chinese phrases "损失" "无效" into the matrix language of English. Students accept these code-switching expressions because all of them are aware that they are in need of these business expressions when they are reading and translating business contracts. Code-switching can solve their problems and reduce the overall comprehension burden. In this way, code switching is necessary and useful for making teaching process more effective and help students learn in a more efficient way.

3.2.2 For better Communication among Teachers and Students in Classroom Activities

In order to avoid communication breakdown, code-switching is often applied by teachers unconsciously in classrooms for better communication with students. In ESP classes, students are learning business or other professional knowledge and skills and it is easier for them to listen to the native language in difficult part to have a better understanding in the classroom activities.

In business English classes, teachers have higher level of language capability and they have both perceptual and national cognition of the targeted language, which influenced their way of thinking and their use of vocabulary. Moreover, they are well-equipped with not only good English language ability but also profound knowledge of business or economics, and they can combine these two together very flexibly. But students do not. Furthermore, teachers and students live in different periods. Their living environments have changed tremendously. So they have different ideologies, discourse forms and identities. Sometimes they use different words to express themselves and this can lead to misunderstanding of each other. In order to avoid communication breakdown by using target language of English in class, teachers often use code-switching that is by speaking in their mother tongue to overcome these communication obstacles time to time when they think it is necessary in order to achieve the educational purpose through good communication with their students.

For example, in the classroom activities, when the teacher ask students to analyze a business case that

is related to “Which one to choose? Debt financing or equity financing?”, he/she may explain the financing knowledge and guide the students to specific steps of how to analyze the case in English first and then in order to sustain a better communication with the students and ensure that students understand the requirements of this classroom activity, the teacher may usually switch to the native language of Chinese “债务融资和股权融资” for further explanation on it. At the same time, when students do the case analysis in pairs or in groups, they can also switch to Chinese to ask the teacher questions when they come across some problems or doubts in the case analysis. This process may be filled with code-switching from the target language of English to their mother tongue by the teacher and students in order to enhance a better communication on the tasks in class.

3.2.3 For Emphasizing or Clarifying Professional Knowledge

In classes, teachers use code-switching with the purpose of emphasizing or clarifying the professional knowledge especially the business knowledge.

For example, in the business English class of *Marketing*, the teacher says “What is the break-even analysis 盈亏平衡分析 which is an important tool for deciding whether or not to launch a new product?” As the teacher has just instructed the students on “break-even analysis” and wants to make sure what he says of the business concept is understood correctly by his students so he repeats it again in native language to stress importance on this business knowledge for better comprehension by the students. And here such code-switching is a kind of repetition of the target language and it plays the role of emphasizing the professional knowledge.

Code choices can also play the role of clarifying professional knowledge. In explaining how profit is made by businesses, the teacher says that “When the total revenue exceeds the total cost, profit can be obtained; When the total revenue cannot cover the total cost, losses will be made; When the total revenue is equal to the total cost, we can reach at the break-even point where neither profit nor loss is made...so we can get the formula “Revenue – Cost = Profit 收入减去成本等于利润...” Here code-switching is functioning as the role of clarifying business knowledge especially the business formula on profit to students.

Sometimes code-switching is used purposely by teachers for checking. For instance, “are these two expressions ‘common stockholder 普通股股东’ and ‘preferred stockholder 优先股股东’ the same thing?” The teacher purposely switched to Chinese when he mentioned these two terms and raised a question. Actually, he wants to make his questions be answered so that he can check if his students truly understand the English expressions of them.

3.2.4 For Class Management or Emotional Communication

Code-switching is also used for socializing purposes. It can be used for classroom management or for emotional communication.

When the students distract from the class or not focused, or when they are not so interested in the teaching content, the teachers can use the code-switching strategy by speaking in the native language to draw students’ attention. In such circumstances, code-switching can be a good tactic for teachers to

arouse students attention and interests into the teaching content and it can be an efficient way for classroom management.

For another example, when the teacher raises a question in the middle of teaching, he may say “Anybody who still remember the best strategy for investment? How to choose between bonds and stocks? “买债券还是股票呢?” It is not an easy question for students to answer because there are a lot of circumstances of choosing different modes of investment and there are advantages or disadvantages for each mode. There is a big possibility that most students do not give response. Maybe they are shy, or maybe they are not able to or reluctant to show their answers. The teaching process may be blocked. Facing this kind of situation, teachers often switch to Chinese “买债券还是股票呢?” in order to give students the indication that this question must be answered and they can make a choice and then state their supporting evidence. The code-switching by the teacher in this example gives a push to motivate students to answer the question. Here it can be considered as a motivation for students to participate in the Q&A activities.

In addition to this aspect, sometimes teachers may switch to the mother tongue Chinese for expressing emotions, seek solidarity, build intimate relationships with students and establish a good and harmonious class atmosphere. As in the business English class, the teachers(Chinese) and business English students are Chinese people, and they are under the same cultural and language background and the interaction among them is the so-called monolingual cultural communication. The native language can be easier for students to understand the emotions and thoughts that the teachers want to express. What’s more, teachers may sometimes switch to the mother tongue Chinese to make students feel relaxed in the class and they can have a better relationship when the learning process make students feel relaxed and comfortable.

4. Conclusion

From the perspectives of sociolinguistics and bilingual teaching, under the background of constructing “New Liberal Arts”, this paper studies teachers’ code-switching strategy applied in ESP teaching, especially in business English teaching classrooms through analyzing the necessity, the application and functions of code-switching strategy in business English teaching. Based on the analysis, we can conclude that conscious and proper code-switching in classrooms is very necessary and important in the teaching process, and it can make teaching more effective and has a good effect on business English teaching. There are many functions of code-switching used by teachers in business English classrooms, such as for good understanding of business terms or expressions; for better communication among teachers and students in classroom activities; for emphasizing or clarifying professional knowledge; for class management or emotional communication and so on.

However, we do not mean code-switching is always positive and good for teaching. Code-switching should be used to a proper extent. Because of the specific features of code switching in business English teaching, we should pay more attention to the proper and conscious use of code-switching in

order to get the effective functions of code-switching. So we should keep in mind that code switching as a teaching tactic should be utilized consciously and properly.

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